

We have come so far. For the last 12 weeks we have opened the Scripture – and discovered ourselves in its pages:

- We found ourselves in Eden’s bliss, where God breathed life into us and made us in his image, and the world was very good ... till sin came crouching at our door.
- We sailed away in Noah’s ark, when God washed the sins of the earth clean.
- We left our home in Babylon behind with Abraham, when God called him for a special covenant – a Promised Land and descendants, a blessing to the world.
- When our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob wrestled with the covenant, each of us wrestled with God’s purposes for our own lives.
- When God gave Jacob the new name Israel, and chose all twelve sons for the promise, we learned how hard it is to share our blessings and responsibilities.
- We covered with Joseph when his jealous brothers sold him into slavery ... and marveled when God used him at Pharaoh’s right hand to provide during the famine in the land.
- We felt the shackles of slavery in Egypt, and the joy when God heard our cry. We cheered as Moses bested Pharaoh’s power and led us across the Red Sea to freedom.
- Then for forty long years we wandered in the wilderness. We were frightened, so we built a golden calf to worship. Even then the Lord showed patience with us, giving us the 10 commandments to show us a life that is worthy of the people of God: to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength ... and to love our neighbor as our self.
- At last we were ready for the Promised Land! God gave us kings: the shepherd-king, David, the greatest king, whose house God would keep forever on the throne, and whose Solomon his son who built a Temple for the Lord. It was our Golden Age of kings.
- And then – so quickly -- we felt the painful dismantling of the promise. Brutal kings. Corrupt worship. Destitute widows; exploited children. Civil war. In the north, Assyria smashed Israel; in the south, Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. God’s Temple lay in ruins; we were exiled.
- For 50 years we lingered in Babylon. Second and third generations were born who did not know our homeland. Then, just when we had utterly given up hope, God again heard our cry, forgave our sins, and saved us by his servant: King Cyrus of Persia, who sent us home ... home to the land God promised Abraham so long ago.
- So we came home, back to the Promised Land ... with a joy beyond words, to be back where we belong. But homecomings are rarely a time of unalloyed joy, are they? For things are never just as we remembered them. When we returned from exile, we found our homes in disrepair. Our children didn’t know the language; our rituals were meaningless to them. We had become strangers in our own homeland ... living under foreign occupation ... and the glory days of King David would never be coming back.

So now what? What happens next? What happens when hope fades and God’s promise is a distant memory? In the centuries after we returned from exile, we turned to the only answers disappointment ever offers. Perhaps they won’t sound unfamiliar.

First we tried blame. We blamed our troubles on our government: the kings were corrupt; why didn't they take their power to heart and govern with integrity? We blamed our parents and their parents' generations: they knew they were supposed to be righteous; why did they go after the gods of their culture -- the foreign gods, and local ones like gold and power and fame? We blamed our religious leaders: as long as people were tithing generously and showing up at worship, the priests didn't care if their people neglected the poor or defrauded their workers.

But blame only carries us so far, because eventually we're the ones who are in charge, and when things aren't going well, it's our own responsibility.

So we tried a second tack: resignation. We lowered our expectations and accommodated ourselves to the new reality. Any worship would be good enough, as long as it was done decently and in order. A second-rate set of priests would be fine as long as the music was good. As for "real life" -- what were we supposed to do about the poor? Life is unfair. We came to appreciate the compromises necessary to get by: a greased hand here, an extra donation there, having the right people to dinner, making a point of being on the right side of the "powers that be." No matter that the powers keep changing: first the Persians ... then the Greeks under Alexander the Great ... then the Romans. *Realpolitik* requires accommodation. And the promises of God? If they were ever real, they don't make much sense now.

And resignation ... resignation works for many of us still, much of the time. It's a safe bet, after all, because you don't risk further disappointment. The problem is that it is simply grim to live that way.

And so, for some of us, there's only one more option: the option of hope. Unmerited, ill-advised, illogical hope. It is often out of the ashes of disappointment that we begin to see visions and dream dreams. So it is that a vision came to us and our people: the vision of the Messiah.

Listen to these visions of hope from the prophets:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you: triumphant and victorious is he" -- the prophet Zechariah writes. The Messiah will come as mighty King and he will restore the throne of David.

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing" -- the prophet Isaiah writes. The Messiah will come as cosmic healer, and he will revive the whole creation.

But there is also this vision of the Messiah: "Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like a fuller's soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and purify the sons of Levi like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." The Messiah will also come as prophet/priest, and he will reproach our sin.

It is not a comfortable word for us. We much prefer the vision of a loving Savior -- not the Lord who judges us, who requires repentance, who forges us into better selves. But hope demands that we seek exactly this Messiah at such a time as this.

I love this picture that our member, Ann Roberts, painted: the image of the faithful bringing offerings – offerings not to be celebrated and fawned over, but to be burned up in the fire. But the reason for their burning is not because they are rejected by the Lord; precisely opposite: to uncover the pure gold and silver beneath the dross ... to uncover the image of God in which we were made, that lies beneath the surface of the layers of false piety and stinginess, the layers of corruption and compromise ... the layers of superficial generosity and genial charity that do not touch the injustice that strangle the poor.

And it is a hopeful word. It is the *good* that has become corrupted. We who are descendants of Levi carry in our bones and blood the purity and devotion of our better ancestors. We who are children of Israel are marked in our name and our very bodies by the covenant sworn to our father Abraham. God loves us, and remembers what is possible in us, and longs for our full restoration.

What if the refiner's fire really could burn away all the dross and corruption from our lives? All the petty grudges and savored hurts, all the prideful silence and the missed opportunities for love? What if it could melt our walls, built against all the people we have fearfully ignored, the homeless and the crazy, the nameless refugees and haunting faces of hungry children? What if ... what if all that we know is wrong with all world – the injustice and inequity, the brutality and violence, the casual indifference and hopeless resignation – what if it could be burned away, melted down, discarded from our lives?

It is an outrageous promise, far beyond what we usually dare to hope for, that the Messiah will purify our world, and make us holy people. Yet the Lord claims that it will be so. For what the Lord still sees in us is this: beneath the accumulated dross and sin and cheap veneer, God remembers in us what we have not dared to remember: God still sees the gold, and the beauty, and the goodness ... the goodness of his image in us still. Amen.

*Hope requires ... “Advent Shock” – profound dissatisfaction with the present because of a longed-for future—as opposed to past. (Ricciuti)*

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice; to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness.”